

SUMMER
of PROMISE

A NOVEL



AMANDA
CABOT

WESTWARD WINDS

WESTWARD WINDS • BOOK I



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of PROMISE

A NOVEL

A M A N D A
C A B O T



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WYOMING TERRITORY, JUNE 1885

There were times when Abigail Harding wished she were an only child. This was one of them. If it hadn't been for Charlotte, she would not be cooped up in a stagecoach, crossing land so barren that not even coyotes favored it, all the while accompanied by a woman who had never heard that silence was golden.

"It's a mighty pretty day, ain't it?"

Abigail winced as the coach swayed, tossing her against the side for what seemed like the hundredth time. Though Concord coaches were reputed to be the most comfortable ever made, nothing could smooth a rutted road. Ruts, she had been informed by her talkative companion, were preferable to mud, which could bog down the wheels, leaving passengers no alternative but to disembark into the muck.

Thankful for small mercies, Abigail nodded. “The sky is beautiful,” she admitted. That was the only positive thing she could say about this desolate countryside. She certainly wasn’t going to claim that she found Wyoming Territory beautiful when she most definitely did not, but she also saw no need to insult Mrs. Dunn, even if she wished the woman would stop talking. Abigail was no stranger to loneliness, and, judging from the stories she’d told, neither was the widow. That was probably why she had taken Abigail under her wing when she saw her waiting for the stagecoach in Cheyenne, ignoring Abigail’s protests that she could manage on her own and had in fact come all the way from Wesley, Vermont, without a companion. It would be most unseemly, Mrs. Dunn had claimed, for Abigail to continue to travel unaccompanied, particularly when one of the other passengers on the coach bound for Deadwood was a single man.

“He’s a soldier,” her self-appointed protector had hissed, as if Abigail was unable to recognize a uniform. “That oughta mean he’s honorable, but you cain’t be too careful.” Even the sight of a married couple purchasing tickets wasn’t enough to dissuade Mrs. Dunn. She kept a firm grip on Abigail’s arm. “They’re rich folks,” she declared, pointing to the pile of finely tooled luggage that accompanied them. “They won’t want nothin’ to do with us.”

And so Abigail found herself on the backseat next to the woman who passed the hours knotting and unknotting her reticule strings, while the lieutenant lounged on the front seat next to the wealthy couple, one of his feet propped on the empty bench that formed the middle row of indoor seating, his cap tipped over his eyes. Propriety was clearly observed, for he and Abigail were separated by the entire length of the

coach, and they spoke only when the stagecoach stopped and he helped Abigail and Mrs. Dunn descend the steep steps.

As Mrs. Dunn had predicted, the couple, who'd introduced themselves as Mr. and Mrs. Fitzgerald of New York City, had said little beyond complaining that they were forced to ride facing backwards. When Abigail had offered them her spot and the unoccupied one between her and Mrs. Dunn, the widow had protested. "You cain't sit with the man. It ain't done." She'd clutched Abigail's arm and kept her pinned to the seat. The obviously disgruntled Fitzgeralds had resorted to talking quietly to each other and completely ignored Mrs. Dunn. Though Abigail couldn't blame them, that had left her as the sole object of the overly proper widow's conversation.

"So, you like our sky." Mrs. Dunn nodded at Abigail in approval. Her brown eyes, which had filled with tears when she spoke of her beloved husband's death and the difficulty of maintaining their ranch without him, sparkled once more. Though her husband had been deceased for more than a year, Mrs. Dunn still wore full mourning, claiming that she would never cease to love him. Her decidedly unfashionable dress bore a heavy coat of gray-brown dirt, and even the veil that covered the top half of her face had dust motes caught in the mesh, compliments of the constant wind that stirred up dirt and propelled it eastward at what seemed like little less than tornado speed.

Though she felt no desire to continue the conversation, good manners forced Abigail to say, "I've never seen a sky so clear or such a deep blue." All that was true. What was also true was that this part of the journey was the worst yet. The train had been reasonably comfortable, and Cheyenne had proved to be less primitive than she'd expected, even though

it appeared that the entire male population believed that at least one weapon was a necessary part of a man's wardrobe. Unfortunately, now Abigail was in the middle of nowhere, and nothing Mrs. Dunn could say would change that. There was no sign of life, unless you counted the brush that blanketed the rolling hills where trees should have been.

That brush was alive, all right. Alive and ready to attack. The cactuses were bad enough, but the real villains were the yuccas. Why had God created a plant with spiky leaves edged with razor-sharp points? Surely it wasn't to rip holes in an unsuspecting woman's skirt. Mrs. Dunn claimed that the yuccas would be blessed with beautiful white blossoms later this month. Be that as it may, Abigail considered their existence proof that this was not a place where civilized persons should live. Yuccas and wind that howled incessantly were not Abigail's idea of paradise on Earth.

"I don't reckon Wyoming Territory looks much like home to you."

Had Mrs. Dunn read her thoughts? This place that had been Charlotte's home for a year appeared decidedly unsuitable. Abigail frowned as she stared out the window. Try though she might, she could not picture her older sister enjoying life in such a wilderness. Elizabeth, the youngest of the three Harding children, might consider it an adventure, but Charlotte favored fancy gowns, meals served on fine china, and the company of sociable women. Even though she had assured Abigail that Fort Laramie was far more appealing than one might imagine an Army fort to be, it was still surrounded by desolate countryside.

Perhaps that was why Charlotte's letters had seemed so strained. Perhaps that was why Abigail had been unable to

dismiss her concerns. Perhaps that was why she'd felt compelled to board a train and leave her carefully planned life behind. When she had left Vermont, she had been certain it was God's will that she come here. Now she wasn't certain of anything.

Fixing a smile on her face, Abigail turned back to her traveling companion. The Fitzgeralds, probably as bored as she, appeared to be dozing. "You're right. Wyoming is quite different from Vermont," she said, trying not to sigh as she thought of her home. "Most of the state is very green. In fact, that's how it got its name. The word *Vermont* is derived from the French words for 'green' and 'mountains.' Its nickname is the green mountain state." Abigail bit her lip as she realized that she'd fallen into schoolmarm mode. Mrs. Dunn didn't want a lesson in etymology any more than Abigail wanted to be here. If it hadn't been for her worries about Charlotte, Abigail would have been home, enjoying fresh air while she played tennis with Woodrow and made plans for their life together. Instead, she was stuck in a hot, dusty stagecoach with Mrs. Dunn, the Fitzgeralds, and the soldier who was pretending to be asleep.

Mrs. Dunn eyed their companions before giving Abigail an appraising look. "So, your sister married a soldier." Abigail had admitted as much when she'd purchased passage only as far as Fort Laramie. Mrs. Dunn was going a few miles farther, and the Fitzgeralds were headed for the end of the line, the gold mine town of Deadwood.

"That's good." Mrs. Dunn's nod dislodged some of the face powder she'd applied with a liberal hand. Mama would not have approved of the way Mrs. Dunn had painted her face. She had maintained that only actresses and fallen

women felt the need to enhance their God-given beauty, but Mama had not experienced the Wyoming sun and wind. Perhaps paint and powder were the only ways to maintain a woman's complexion.

"Soldiering's a mighty fine profession," Mrs. Dunn announced. "A woman could do a lot worse."

And a lot better. Charlotte could have married a man whose profession was something—anything—other than killing. Abigail bit back the retort. There was nothing to be gained by starting an argument. Instead, she kept a smile fixed on her face and let the older woman continue her monologue. Perhaps she'd tire eventually. Though Abigail estimated that the widow was only in her midforties, she moved like a much older woman, the result, she said, of stepping into a gopher hole. "I done broke my ankle, and it ain't never healed right. I reckon I'm gonna limp for the rest of my days." Her story had done nothing to convince Abigail that Wyoming was a desirable place to live. Wind, dust, gopher holes. Each mile revealed a new unpleasant aspect to Charlotte's home.

Mrs. Dunn leaned over and patted Abigail's hand. "It wouldn't surprise me none if you found yourself a husband while you was at the fort. Soldiers are mighty lonely, always lookin' for a wife. You just gotta be careful, cuz they ain't all honorable."

"I'm not looking for a husband." Even if she weren't almost promised to Woodrow, the last place Abigail would seek a spouse was at an Army fort. The life of a soldier's wife was not for her. No indeed. God might have sent her here, but he didn't intend for her to stay. Abigail was as certain of that as she was that something was seriously wrong in her sister's life.

Knotting her reticule strings again, Mrs. Dunn shook her head. “Nonsense. Every woman is lookin’ for a man of her own. Look at this here lieutenant.”

Abigail had done exactly that when they’d entered the coach. The man, who’d introduced himself as Lieutenant Bowles, was at least half a foot taller than her own five and a half feet, with blond hair and eyes almost as deep a blue as the Wyoming sky. His uniform was the same design as the one Jeffrey had worn for his wedding to Charlotte: a dark blue double-breasted wool frock coat with seven brass buttons marching down each side, lighter blue wool trousers with a white stripe indicating membership in the infantry. The difference was that while Jeffrey had seemed a bit ill at ease, this man wore his uniform as comfortably as he did his skin.

It was true that Abigail had noted how Lieutenant Bowles’s uniform highlighted broad shoulders and long legs, but what caught her attention time and again were his lips. Though no fuller than normal, they were surprisingly expressive, curving and twitching in response to Mrs. Dunn’s more outrageous comments, even though the rest of his face remained as impassive as if he were truly sleeping.

“He’d be a good husband for you,” Mrs. Dunn declared.

Abigail darted a glance at the man in question. Though he appeared to be fighting a smile, she was not amused by Mrs. Dunn’s tendency to make pronouncements with no foundation. Look at the way she tried to enforce her decidedly old-fashioned views of propriety. There would have been nothing wrong with Abigail’s sitting on the opposite seat.

“Most likely he ain’t married. ’Course, you cain’t be sure. He might have a sweetheart somewhere. I’m fixin’ to ask him when he wakes up.”

Abigail sighed. The lieutenant had the right idea. She should have pretended to be asleep.



Ethan Bowles struggled to keep his lips from frowning. If the old biddy knew he was awake, he'd have no peace. She'd continue the relentless questioning—little less than an inquisition—that had convinced him to feign sleep in the first place. And this time she'd focus on his marital status. Once she learned that he was unattached, it would be far worse. Ethan gritted his teeth. Why was it that people felt the need to match make? First his grandfather, then virtually every married woman he'd met. You'd think they would realize that some men were meant to be bachelors, with him first on that list. But, no, they seemed to believe that every single man was a candidate for the state of wedded bliss. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

He shifted his weight slightly, wishing he could open his eyes. The trip went more quickly when a man could enjoy the scenery. And this trip had more than the territory's natural beauty to enjoy. The young woman, Miss Harding she'd said her name was, was downright easy on the eyes, even if she was wearing clothing that had to be uncomfortable. The high neckline and long sleeves were practical, as was the dark blue color—not too different from his uniform. But the skirt made no sense. Those pleats barely cleared the ground, which meant that they served as dust magnets, and then there was that silly bump in the back. Oliver, his friend who claimed to know everything there was to know about women, had informed him that ladies called them bustles. Ethan called them ridiculous. Why would a woman saddle herself with something that had to get in the way when she sat? The only

good thing he could say about the widow was that she didn't have any such impediments. Her dress might not be fashionable, but it was more practical than what Miss Harding and Mrs. Fitzgerald were wearing.

Despite the preposterous clothing, Miss Harding was worth a second look. Underneath that fancy hat, her hair was pulled back in one of those knots that women seemed to like, but even that couldn't hide the fact that it was a pretty shade of brown. What intrigued Ethan most were her eyes. It was a shame he was pretending to be asleep, because he was still trying to figure out what color they were. Not quite brown, not quite green, but downright pretty, especially when she smiled. That was when he was sure he'd seen hints of gold in them.

The widow was right. Soldiers out here didn't get to see too many women, and women as beautiful as Miss Harding were as rare as gold nuggets in the North Platte River. Even though he had no interest—no matrimonial interest, that is—in Miss Harding, Ethan couldn't deny that he would have enjoyed looking at her, but he sure as shooting didn't want to get trapped into another conversation involving the widow, and so he kept his eyes closed. Years of ignoring his grandfather's barbs had taught him the value of feigning indifference.

"Did you live on a farm in Vermont?" The widow was talking again, and since Ethan wasn't available, she was questioning Miss Harding. The poor woman. By the time the lady with those intriguing eyes reached Fort Laramie, her every secret would be revealed.

"No." It was only one word, but Ethan heard the reluctance in Miss Harding's voice. It appeared she wasn't enjoying the

interrogation any more than he had the volley of questions the widow had fired at him when they'd first entered the stagecoach. "I teach at a girls' academy." His lips twitched as he realized that was the reason she sounded so prim and why she'd given the little lesson on the origin of Vermont's name. Schoolmarms, at least schoolmarms in Ethan's experience, were prim and proper. They had to be.

He heard the intake of breath before Mrs. Dunn spoke. "In my day," she said, her voice leaving no doubt of her disapproval, "girls stayed home and cared for their parents until they married. They didn't take jobs away from able-bodied men."

Of course, in the aftermath of the war there were fewer able-bodied men than there had been before Antietam and Gettysburg and the other battles that had destroyed hopes along with lives. Ethan wondered whether Miss Harding would mention that. Instead she said simply, "It was my parents' wish that I become a teacher. Fortunately, I find it rewarding."

And he found soldiering rewarding. Most days, that is. Today all he felt was frustration. Frustration with the men who cared nothing for their oaths and obligations and who deserted the Army, and even greater frustration with himself for being unable to find them. He'd gone to Cheyenne expecting to locate the pocket of deserters who were reported to be living there. Instead, he'd found nothing but dead ends. That was why he was heading back to the fort a day earlier than planned. He would have only wasted time if he stayed in Cheyenne, and if there was one thing Ethan hated, it was wasting time. If he was going to earn his commanding officer's respect, he could not afford to spend a whole day doing nothing more than strolling city streets.

While Mrs. Dunn continued to speak, enumerating the advantages of living in Wyoming Territory, Ethan did his best to ignore her words.

“One thing you gotta say about livin’ here,” the widow said, her voice reverberating against the sides of the stagecoach, “it’s mighty peaceful.”

Despite his resolve to pay no attention to the women’s conversation, Ethan found himself listening for Miss Harding’s response. When it came, it was little more than a mutter. “Some might call it boring.”



It was boring. Abigail gazed out the window, trying not to frown at the endless miles of unchanging scenery. Since they’d left the road ranch where they’d eaten a surprisingly tasty dinner and where her skirts had had the unfortunate encounter with yucca leaves, there had been nothing but rolling hills under the biggest sky she’d ever seen. As she’d told Mrs. Dunn, the sky was beautiful, but Abigail needed more. Even a cloud would have helped break the monotony. Unfortunately, not a single one dotted the sky. There was only sun and wind and scrubby hills.

How could Charlotte bear it? Perhaps she couldn’t. Perhaps that was the reason her letters had sounded so melancholy. Though her sister denied it, Abigail knew that something was dreadfully amiss.

If only she had a book. It would be several hours before they reached Fort Laramie, and now that Mrs. Dunn had fallen asleep, Abigail could read. Unfortunately, all her books were safely packed in her trunk, leaving her with nothing to do but stare out the window. Hills and brush, brush and hills. Nothing more. Boring.

Abigail wasn't sure how long she'd had her eyes focused on the distance when she saw the cloud of dust. For a moment, she stared at it, wondering if it was a mirage. She'd heard that travelers in the desert conjured images of oases with life-giving water, only to discover that the shimmering pools of water were nothing more than a trick of light. Abigail did not seek water; she craved signs of human habitation, but the dust must be a mirage, for Mrs. Dunn had said there were few settlers in this area. Abigail was simply imagining that the brown cloud was caused by horses. Still, the swirling dust grew nearer, and as it did, she saw that the cloud was caused by two riders, one on a dark horse, the other a palomino.

Abigail swallowed deeply, unsure whether the shiver that made its way down her spine was caused by anticipation or apprehension. "Someone's coming." Though she hadn't intended to, she spoke the words aloud. The response was instantaneous.

"Where?" Lieutenant Bowles moved quickly, confirming Abigail's assumption that he had not been asleep. One second he was lounging on the seat, the next he was staring out the window, watching the approaching riders, those expressive lips thinning, then turning into a frown.

"It's trouble," he said shortly. "Probably road agents." In one fluid movement, he unholstered his revolver and balanced it on the window ledge.

Abigail cringed as unwelcome images crowded her brain. *No!* she wanted to shout. *Stop!* She bit the inside of her cheek as she forced the memories away. *Think of something else. Anything.* Seizing on the unfamiliar term the lieutenant had used, she asked, "Road agents?"

"Bandits."

Abigail's heart began to pound. Though she had read several of the penny dreadful novels she had confiscated from students, she had thought the stories of bandits holding up stagecoaches were exaggerations. Now it was apparent that she was going to experience a holdup, and—if the stories had any validity—that meant . . .

She bit her cheek again, the metallic taste telling her she'd drawn blood. Blood, just like . . . She focused on Lieutenant Bowles, trying to banish the memories.

Without taking his eyes off the horsemen, the lieutenant motioned toward the opposite side of the coach. "Stay back," he ordered, "and keep the others quiet." Though Mrs. Dunn was still so deeply asleep that she had released her grip on her reticule and Mrs. Fitzgerald was snoring lightly, Abigail did not doubt that the women would scream if they realized what was happening. She had no idea what Mr. Fitzgerald might do, but she knew that any distraction could be dangerous.

Abigail took a deep breath, trying to calm herself, then darted another look at the approaching men. She wouldn't—she absolutely would not—look at the lieutenant's revolver. "They're soldiers." She whispered the words, not wanting to waken the others. The approaching riders' uniforms were the same shade of blue as Lieutenant Bowles's. The difference was, these men wore bandannas over their faces. It could be to protect them from the dust, but the lieutenant's intake of breath said otherwise.

"Probably deserters, up to no good." He leaned out the window, twisting to face the front of the coach, and yelled at the driver. "Don't stop. No matter what happens, don't stop unless I tell you to."

"But, sir . . ." Fear colored the coachman's words.

“Trust me. Keep going.”

The driver cracked the whip, and the horses began to run, setting the coach to lurching. As her reticule tumbled from her lap, Mrs. Dunn’s eyes flew open.

“What’s going on?” she screeched, her eyes focusing on the lieutenant’s drawn weapon. The scream wakened the Fitzgeralds, and the woman clung to her husband, fright darkening her eyes.

“Quiet, everyone.” Abigail used her best schoolmarm tone, the one that never failed to silence unruly children. “It’s bandits.” She wrapped her arm around Mrs. Dunn’s shoulders and pressed the widow into the seat. If Lieutenant Bowles was going to save the gold or whatever it was the outlaws sought, he needed no interference.

“No!” Mrs. Dunn struggled against Abigail, her eyes darting from the lieutenant to her lap. “My reticule. I need my reticule.”

The heavy bag had slid to the other side of the coach, where it lay near the lieutenant’s feet. Though Mr. Fitzgerald looked as if he would retrieve the reticule, Abigail shook her head. “Not now.” From the corner of her eye, she saw the bandits approach. In seconds they would reach the coach. And then . . . *Dear Lord, keep us safe.*

“Smelling salts! I need my smelling salts.” Mrs. Dunn’s imperious tone only worsened Mrs. Fitzgerald’s whimpering.

As the widow stretched her arms toward her reticule, Abigail dug inside her own bag and pulled out a small vial. Mama had been insistent that a lady always carry smelling salts, claiming one never knew when there might be an emergency. Even Mama, who had been blessed with an active imagination, had probably never envisioned a time like this. “Here.” Abigail uncapped the bottle and thrust it under Mrs. Dunn’s

nose. When the widow snorted with what sounded like indignation, Mrs. Fitzgerald buried her face in her husband's coat, sobbing softly while he murmured reassurances.

Outside, the palomino's rider said something to his companion, and the other man raised his rifle to aim at the stagecoach driver. Abigail shuddered as dread surged through her veins. *Please, no.* The driver was an innocent man, only doing his job. He did not deserve to die. No one did. Not like this. As the coach continued to lurch, Abigail heard the sounds of a whip cracking and a desperate shout. She tightened her grip on Mrs. Dunn. Though she might not be able to help the driver, she could keep the friendly widow away from the window and danger.

"Gif me the *Gelt*," the bandit shouted, his heavy accent telling Abigail that German was his native language. As the lieutenant muttered something under his breath, his tone left no doubt that that something was uncomplimentary. "Gif me the *Gelt*," the man repeated.

It was the lieutenant who responded, never taking his eyes off the would-be robber. "There is no money, and you won't get anything else."

"Don't pay him no mind," the man on the palomino told his companion. "He's only one, and we're two." Though unschooled, this man's voice bore no accent.

"Halt, I say," the German ordered. "Halt or I vill shoot." He punctuated his threat with a shot into the air. "That vas a varning. The next one vill not be."

When Mrs. Dunn started to speak, Abigail clasped a hand over her mouth. Nothing she could say, nothing any of them could say, would help. Everything depended on Lieutenant Bowles. *Help him.* Abigail sent a silent prayer heavenward.

Though she had followed the lieutenant's instruction and moved away from the window, she had a clear view of the two outlaws. The one with the heavy accent lowered his rifle until it was once again pointed at the driver. He was closer now, the sight of his rifle causing her stomach to roil.

"Halt!" the bandit yelled. "I vant the *Gelt*," he shouted, his voice so filled with malevolence that Abigail knew he would not hesitate to kill.

"Help!" Panic colored the driver's voice as he pleaded, "Help me."

There was only one possible recourse. Abigail knew that, even as the prospect sickened her. If the lieutenant didn't act now, the driver would be dead. It was a clear choice: kill or watch a man—perhaps more than one—be killed.

As the lieutenant squeezed the trigger, the deafening sound of the revolver filled the coach. "Oh no!" Mrs. Fitzgerald slumped forward in a swoon.

"Stop!" Mrs. Dunn shrieked as she fought to escape from Abigail's grip. "The Lord says 'thou shalt not kill.'"

But the lieutenant had not killed, Abigail realized with a sense of incredulity. Somehow, though she had not thought it possible, he had only wounded the bandit enough that the man dropped his rifle and was clutching his hand.

"Let's go." The other bandit reined his horse and spun around, racing away from the stagecoach, not even glancing back to see whether his wounded companion was behind him. The German, doubled over in pain, followed more slowly.

The danger was past. The Lord had answered her prayers. There had been no killing. Not today. Abigail felt the tension drain from her, leaving her as limp as a wilted stalk of celery. As Mr. Fitzgerald waved Abigail's smelling salts under his

wife's nose, Abigail released her grip on Mrs. Dunn and turned toward the lieutenant, who was now looking at the other passengers as if assessing their condition. "Thank you," she said softly. "I don't know what we would have done without you."

"Just doing my job, miss." His voice was as calm as if he foiled robberies every day of the week. Perhaps he did. The lieutenant leaned out the window again and addressed the driver. "You can stop now. I doubt they'll be back, but I'll ride next to you, just in case."

"What about us?" Mrs. Dunn demanded. She had retrieved her reticule and clutched it as if it held her most prized possessions, not simply a handkerchief and a vial of smelling salts. "I reckon we need protection too."

Though the lieutenant's lips twitched, his voice was serious as he said, "You'll be safe, ma'am, but you might feel better if you pulled down the shades and sat in the middle of the coach."

Now that the danger was past, Abigail could not stop her limbs from trembling. This land was worse, much worse, than she had thought. Dust and wind and relentless sun were nothing compared to murderous outlaws. If it hadn't been for the lieutenant, who knew what might have happened?

She looked out the window at the desolate landscape, no longer searching for signs of life. Barren countryside, even yuccas, were better than the alternative. When her gaze met Lieutenant Bowles's, Abigail said firmly, "Wyoming is no place to live."

She might have imagined it before, but this time there was no question about it. He was trying to control his amusement. "Could be you're right." His lips curved upward as he added, "But you have to admit it's not boring."